

Wares

Health experts want food labeling in chain restaurants

■ Contra Costa Assemblyman wants labels similar to store-bought food

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Local health experts are applauding a bill they hope will pass the California legislature this week that would require chain restaurants to provide nutrition information to diners before they order.

SB 120, co-sponsored by Con-

tra Costa Assemblymember Mark DeSaulnier and endorsed by the Contra Costa Board of Supervisors, would require chain restaurants to provide labeling on menu boards and printed menus similar to what packaged food provides - calories, amount of saturated and trans fat, carbohydrates and sodium. (Information about labeling and fast food calories is available at cchealth.org)

"We know that people are very busy and spend nearly half their food budgets on away-from-home foods. The public has a right to

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have clear and accurate information about what they are choosing to eat so they can support the health of their families," said Wendel Brunner, MD, Contra Costa Public Health Director.

The bill is in the Assembly Appropriations Committee, which will decide Wednesday whether it will be voted on by the full Assembly before it adjourns in mid-September.

According to Brunner, most consumers want to make healthy choices. Research shows 75 percent of shoppers read food labels when they buy packaged foods. Since 1994, a federal law has required food manufacturers to provide nutrition information on

nearly all packaged food but that law exempts restaurants.

"We have an obesity epidemic in this country," said Brunner. "It threatens our children and costs our health care system billions of dollars a year."

Labeling menus is one simple thing we can do to help the public make good choices when they are eating away from home."

Brunner said he thinks most restaurants want to help stem the obesity epidemic, since some of them already voluntarily provide some kind of nutrition information to customers.

"We want to have easy-to-understand information available up front when people are ordering at every chain restaurant. Now, people just have to guess at how many calories and how much fat and sodium is in the food they order. This will take out the guesswork," Brunner said.